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Lost Humanity of the Dead

**Influence of Modern Social Standards and Personal
Biases on Archaeological Research.**

**Lost Humanity of the Dead:
Influence of Modern Social Standard and Personal
Biases on Archaeological Research**

Written component

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Dedicated to my beloved Grandma.
You might not know it, but I made it.

Venované mojej milovanej Omame.
Možno o tom nevieš, ale dokázala som to.

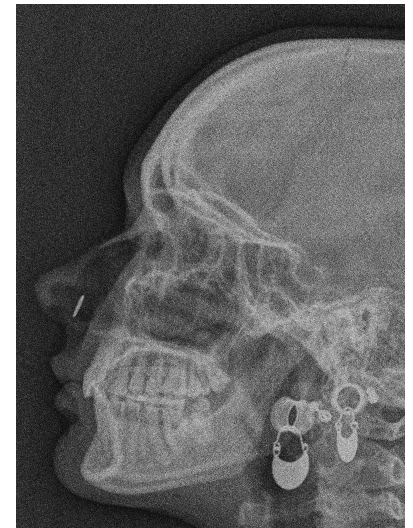
Abstract

This thesis critically examines the field of Archaeology, highlighting its problems and showcasing its shortcomings. By pointing to the flawed history, it prompts the reader to consider whether the same issues and mistakes can be repeated and what problems persist that have never truly been resolved. It delves into the legacy of colonialism and its direct correlation with early archaeological research and the “Golden Age of Archaeology”.

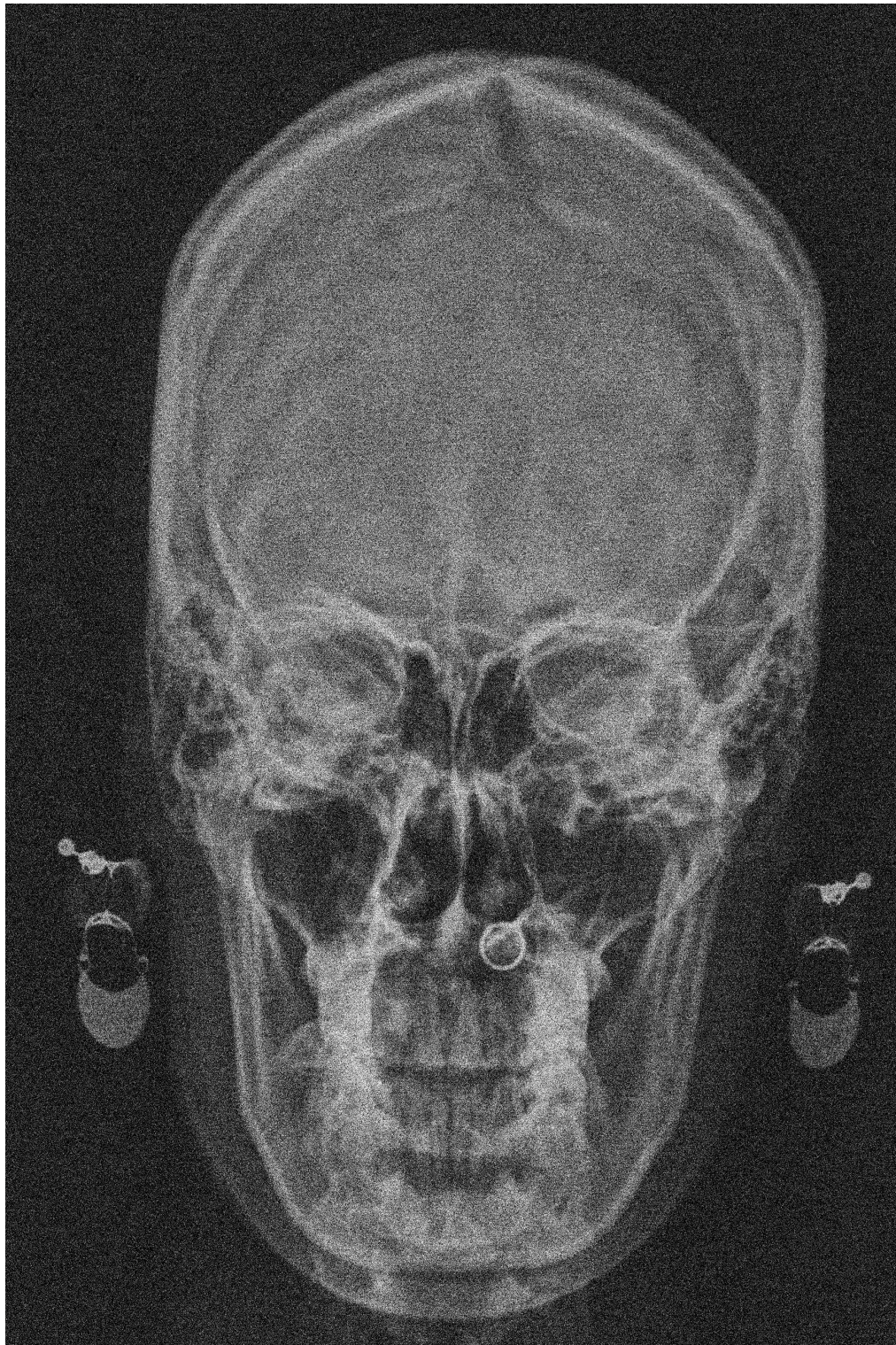
With a foundation in case studies and personal experiences, this thesis criticises museums for their lack of action and exploitation of cultural property, as well as their morally questionable handling of human remains. These remains, in many cases, are disregarded only as artefacts for display and study, with no consideration for their past lives.

Furthermore, the paper addresses the efforts of present-day archaeologists and researchers to address and deal with the problematics, including the repatriation of both artefacts and human remains and the ethical challenges bestowed upon institutions, to own up to and address and remedy the mistakes made during their colonial past, to ensure the cultural heritage is treated with dignity and care.

The artistic component of this thesis involves creating a fictional narrative centred on the author’s death and the subsequent discovery and documentation of their grave by an archaeologist. This fictional burial site is recorded and analysed in the same manner as an actual grave to examine how much information can be derived from it and how accurate or plausible the resulting interpretations may be. The artwork itself comprises collections of X-ray images obtained through various techniques, each depicting different anatomical parts of the author.



1. Profile view of author's wscull.



2. Frontal view of author's skull.

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Ever since I was a child, I've kept thinking about death. I was just a kindergartener when I confronted my mom about the fact that all of us were going to die. I remember climbing into her bed; she was still half asleep, and with tears in my eyes, I stated that one day she would die. That everyone will die. What if I never see her again? I would be left alone, with everyone who cared about me gone, and then what? Being a Christian, she had a way simpler answer than I had expected. She calmly explained to me that we would meet in heaven. And that even if she dies, she will look after me. As a child, it calmed me down, but now I find that explanation somewhat insufficient.

In the end, I grew up to be a very strict atheist, so even if she is right, meeting in the afterlife is kind of out of the window (sorry, mom). However, the question of what happens to the soul after death and whether it even exists is not the aim of this thesis. What is important is our relationship to death, how we view it in the context of history, specifically, archaeology, and, most importantly, what the dead can tell us about the lives they lived.

The problem is that the stories they tell are incomplete. What survives to be excavated is often a tiny and unrepresentative fraction of what once was.¹ We are piecing together a puzzle with missing pieces. Archaeologists and anthropologists are filling in these gaps. Still, more often than not, these puzzle pieces are composed of personal opinions, theories that we want to prove, or simply expectations of something great. They lack simple, fundamental explanations that are inherently human.

How many graves were misinterpreted because of modern-day misogyny? Were women just gatherers, even though they had the ability to be as efficient hunters as men? Were men only hunters? How many facts or artefacts might be fake because someone was chasing fame? Was the

buried animal a ritual offering or simply a pet that someone mourned? How much of what we discover is romanticised as some ritual when, in fact, it might have been just a social gathering to strengthen group relationships and social cohesion? Can our late-night bar visits or customary traditions be considered a ritual? Would we consider them a ritual?

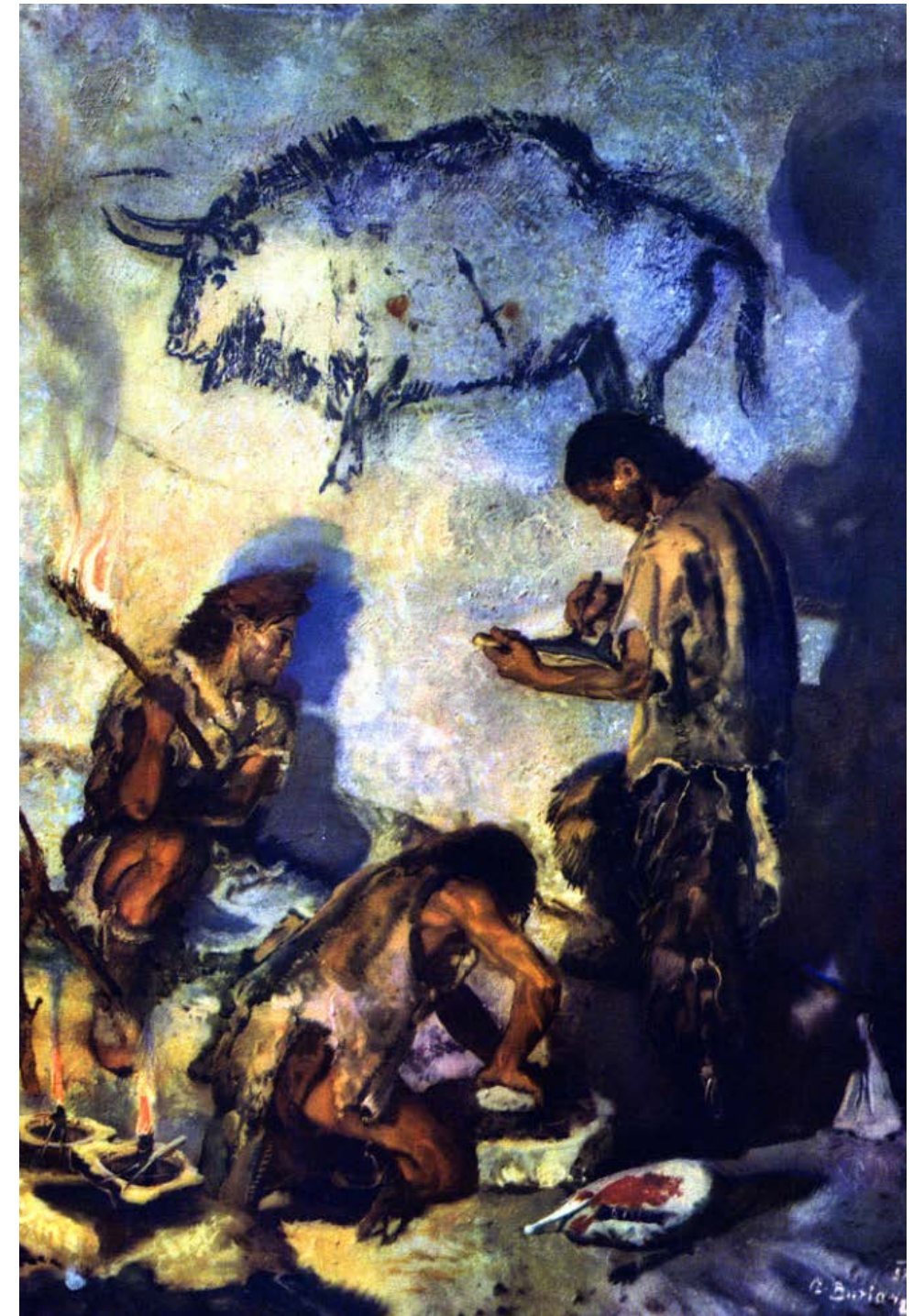
The truth is, no one can be 100% objective. We can try to be, but our upbringing, background, and personal views will always influence our research and its outcome, especially in a field where we often work with incomplete or biased data.

Introduction

Archaeological research often works with material items – such as bones, grave inventory, excavated architecture, or material culture – and, through examination and interpretation, attempts to reconstruct the lives of individuals, as well as entire societies. **But what, and how much, can a grave truly reveal about a person's life? How much of it is fiction, and how many simple mistakes can be made during research that go unnoticed? What assumptions are being made?** This thesis explores these questions through an unconventional experiment: the fictional death and burial of its author, recorded and analysed as a real archaeological case.

Blending art, fiction, and archaeological methodology, the project investigates the limits of archaeological interpretation and the spaces where the imagination fills the gaps between evidence.

In the artistic part, the author works with X-rays of their own body and objects that hold personal significance for them, constructing a narrative about their death to simulate a real discovery. **This aims to challenge the boundaries between facts and fiction, science and storytelling, art and science, and to provoke a discussion on whether these categories are as distinct and separate as we tend to think them to be.**



3. Zdeněk Burian: Prehistoric Man, 1958: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/timetravelnow/5549309300/in/album-72157626014578047/>

Part of archaeological research is undoubtedly critiqueing of literature previously written on the topic. Every archaeologist should review the texts they are working with, cite them, and consider whether the information provided remains relevant and accurate. It is an unwritten rule that any research paper written in the previous decade must be looked at with a grain of salt. Part of the archaeologist's work involves revisiting and reevaluating old cases using modern technology and approaches. Thus, every work should include a part criticising previous research.

The issues and biases in archaeology are a vast theme that has been extensively addressed in numerous scientific journals and texts. The virtual journal sapiens² addresses many essential topics, as well as new archaeological and anthropological discoveries. Especially valuable publications include Dismantling the "Man the Hunter" Myth by Sarah A. Lacy and Cara Ocobok³ and the Women at the Hearth and on the Hunt by Annemieke Milks.⁴ Both authors write about the misconception of prehistoric women being excluded from hunting. A notable publication on this issue is the book "Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology" by Alison Wylie and Robert Chapman.⁵ This book explores how archaeologists work with data identified as a record of the cultural past and how this data is collected and interpreted as evidence. Additionally, it asks the question what the impact on the archaeological practice of new techniques in data recovery and analysis is, especially of those imported from the sciences? Unfortunately, this publication is not available online, with only a few pages accessible on Google Scholar and unavailable

in most libraries.

Another notable publication is "Archaeological Theory Today" by Ian Hodder.⁶ It provides a comprehensive examination of the current state of archaeological theory, as presented by some of its leading exponents and innovators over the past few decades. It summarises the latest developments in the field and looks to its future, exploring some of the ideas at the forefront of the discipline. However, it is also not fully accessible.

2. SAPIENS - Anthropology Magazine'.

3. Lacy and Ocobock, 'Dismantling the "Man the Hunter" Myth'.

4. Milks, 'Women at the Hearth and on the Hunt'.

5. Chapman and Wylie, Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology.

6. Hodder, Archaeological Theory Today.

Critical View on Archaeology

History of the issue: Past Controversies

Man's obsession with gold and fame is well-documented, and this dream draws many who embark on the path of devoting their lives to archaeology; to discover and unearth something extraordinary, something that could be considered a treasure. In this process, they often forget about the importance of the most ordinary artefacts, or the significance of the cultural impact their excavations can have. This selfishness is inherently human, something deeply ingrained in our nature, and it requires excellent self-awareness and self-criticism to prevent it from clouding our judgment.

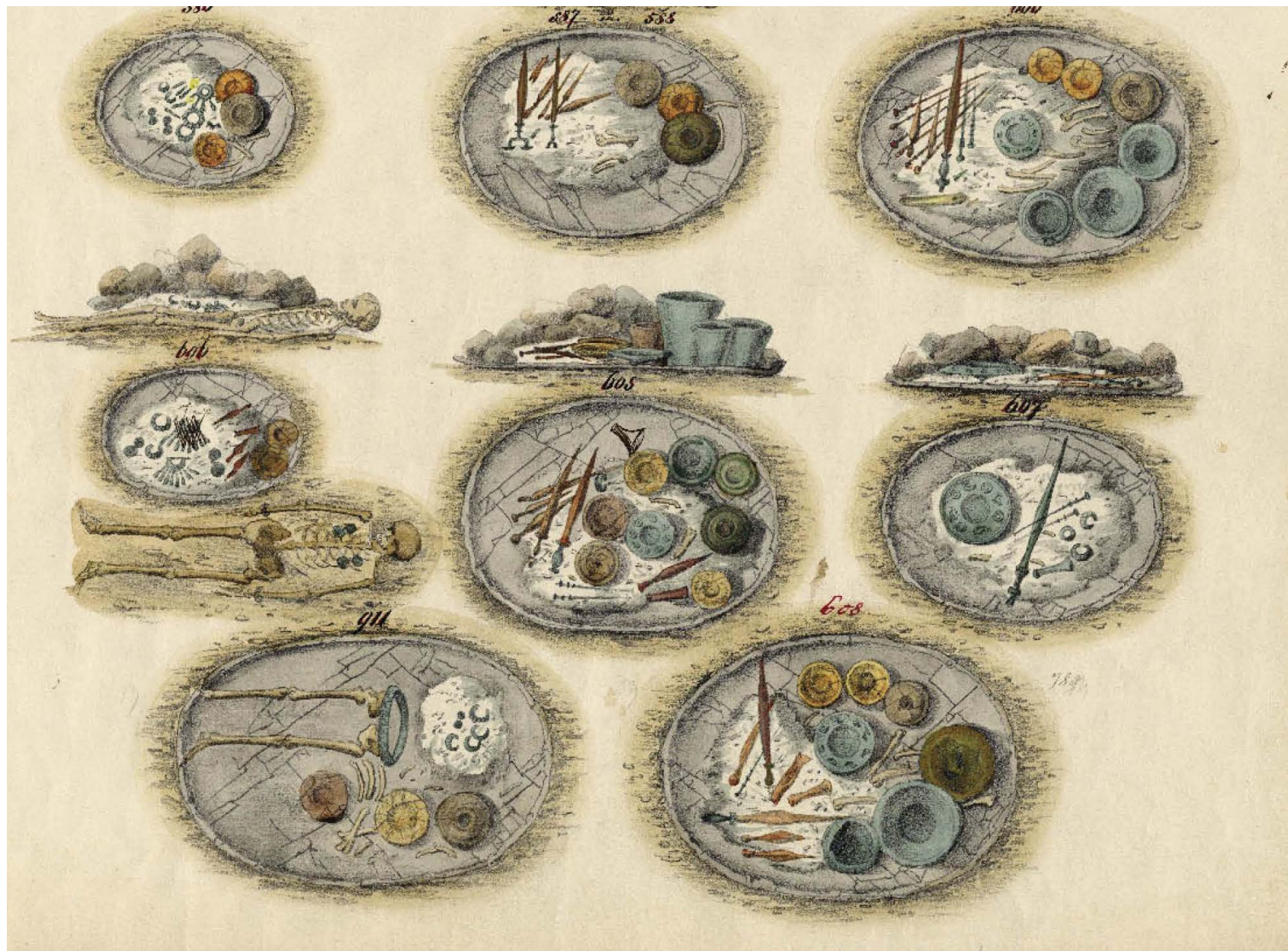
One notable example is the discovery of the legendary city of Troy by Heinrich Schliemann. Although not an archaeologist himself, he was a wealthy German (formerly Prussian) businessman with enough resources and courage to realise this massive excavation. However, his ignorance and greed caused considerable destruction, and to some, his work on Troy represented a tragic chapter in the history of archaeology.

Troy was not destroyed by the Achaeans but by Heinrich Schliemann. In his relentless pursuit—a treasure hunt is the best way to describe it—he excavated indiscriminately through multiple layers of the city under the assumption that the mythical Troy, described in the Iliad, lies in the utter lowest stratum. Not only did he carelessly dig through all the layers of the ancient city, to reach the bottom as soon as possible, but his use of dynamite also revealed that he prioritised wealth and fame over revitalising the city and, in a sense, its citizens. This method destroyed countless invaluable artefacts from the upper layers. It was only after he realised his mistakes that Schliemann enlisted the help of professional archaeologist Wilhelm Dörpfeld.⁷ Unfortunately, by then, the damage had already been done, and many irreplaceable cultural materials and valuable artefacts had been lost forever.

Schliemann's research into Troy coincided with the mid-19th century, a period marked by rising nationalism and intense interest in classical antiquity. It occurred amidst increased political tensions within Europe, with the Ottoman Empire in control over what today constitutes Hisarlık, Turkey. This period witnessed intense competition among European nations, as well as the emergence of a rapidly expanding field of archaeology within academia, which was beginning to exert significant influence. The nationalism and romanticism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries influenced Schliemann's views and ideas. These instances, however, did not change. The geopolitical climate of the world and personal perspectives of researchers/archaeologists continue to impact all research, even today.

The question of what makes an artefact valuable must also be raised. Any immediate answer including such apparent choices as gold, weapons, or any metallic objects, is problematic by itself. The most extraordinary items are often those that came out of middle and lower class society, and helped to build the civilisations. Early archaeology's focus often downplayed these seemingly ordinary items as irrelevant. This attitude is again most reflected in many of the digs throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁸

8. This attitude also irreversibly damages some sites, as detectorists with metal detectors hunt for these artefacts and dig them up with no regard for the grave or any other context of the find.



A bit earlier (in the mid-19th century), a good parallel is provided by the early excavations of the Iron Age necropolis near Hallstatt in Upper Austria. The contribution of Johann Georg Ramsauer, who worked as a mining councillor at the location, is undoubtedly one of the most important for European archaeology. Ramsauer not only provided us with detailed documentation but also

4. Examples of rich graves from the excavation documentation of J. G. Ramsauer: https://www.nhm-wien.ac.at/hallstatt/en/burial_site/burial_practices_/cremations

illustrations of Hallstatt graves and their inventory; however, his records were biased toward graves containing weapons, metal jewellery, and vessels, which could likely be linked to funerary offerings. In contrast, graves with more ordinary inventory were considered uninteresting and thus, were poorly documented.⁹

The shortcomings of this method are obvious. Societies do not exist solely because of their upper classes; ignoring the existence of middle and lower classes skews our view of the past. The Hallstatt site has a distinct advantage over other sites due to its extensive history of archaeological investigation and its unique position as a historic mining community. Ancient mine studies have, therefore, provided crucial information about the lives of the working class during the Iron Age, shedding light on the society that existed underground.

Remarkably, the salt cave system in Hallstatt has preserved organic materials that would have otherwise vanished over time. Among these are leather shoes, wooden tools, and a woven basket used to carry blocks of salt, showcasing both the ingenuity and the daily lives of the miners.¹⁰

Although this being a controversial opinion, one could argue that these artefacts could be considered as valuable as, if not more valuable than the metal treasures excavated in the necropolis.

9. Van der Vaart-Verschoof, 'The Town That Named an Iron Age Culture'.
10. Naturhistorisches Museum Wien - Hallstatt-Research Mining.

Another excellent example of archaeologists' invention of the past is the discovery of Býčí Skála (also known as Bull Rock Cave) in the Czech Republic. The site is of great importance from an archaeological perspective and numerous outstanding findings have been discovered there. But, this was not enough for some people. The archaeologists and researchers, who had to disclose and publish facts began spreading myths, inventing stories about events that had occurred.

Even Zdeněk Burian, a famous Czech painter, was influenced by the overly romanticised interpretation of the location. He famously depicts a series of events that supposedly unfolded in the cave. His painting shows the Burial of a male chief - this was later revisited, and the sex of the remains/ person was identified as female.¹¹ He was supposed to be placed on a gold chariot, accompanied by human and animal sacrifice. According to the current interpretation, this cave was used as a sacrificial site between the 5th and 7th centuries BC. Among the objects sacrificed were approximately 40 human skeletal parts, entire carts, bronze jewellery, numerous pearls, and bronze vessels.¹² The information and research he based his work on went as far as describing the sacrifice of 20 virgins (which, unless the person went through pregnancy, is impossible to determine in human remains, not to mention that virginity itself is a social construct) cut-off hands placed upon an altar with grains (this was never confirmed) and a horse to pull the chariot.

However, the story that the archaeologist working at the locality - Jindřich Wankel constructed about this enormous ritual was disproved as early as 1981. The chariot, as exhibited in the Museum of Natural History Vienna, was not preserved at all, with only a few parts of the plating remaining. I highly recommend visiting



5. Zdeněk Burian: Býčí Skála: <https://balkancelts.wordpress.com/2015/10/04/the-secrets-of-bull-rock-cave/>

the exhibition, not only because it's interesting to see, but also to witness and realise how little is preserved. The exhibited piece is a reconstruction that required considerable imagination to complete.

Wankel's interpretations of anthropological findings are also questionable. He might have had access to entire skeletons, whereas only skulls have been preserved for us to see. As it is generally known, sex determination is easiest based on the pelvis; it is much

more difficult when relying on the skull, especially a damaged one. However, from Wankel's text, it appears that he based his sex determination solely on the skulls and did not consider pelvic morphological features at all; he does not even mention them, as if these were not available to him at the time of recording his inventory. Even if we add five juvenile skulls found, for which the sex cannot be determined, the majority of adults remain male. The idea of a prince's burial surrounded by sacrificed young maidens collapses before our eyes, especially since there is no longer any evidence of this wagon burial today, and Wankel's interpretations were greatly influenced by the romantic tendencies of the late 19th century¹³.

The truth is, we still, to this day, cannot tell what unfolded in this cave. Was it a mass sacrifice, a burial ground or a place of some other importance? Without proper documentation, including entire skeletal remains and technical notes, we are unable to draw conclusions. As stated previously, one of the great tragedies of early archaeology was the lack of documentation and the tendency to overlook artefacts deemed not interesting enough. Despite these facts, the most likely interpretation of the cave is still that it is a place of religious importance, the mass sacrifice remains unlikely.

Imagine how all of this applies to us. What aspects of our lives and day-to-day activities best capture who we are? We own items of sentimental value—our favourite coffee mugs, without which we could not fathom beginning the day; that one unique smelted pot that we got from our grandma, older than we are, that is still the best one for cooking, a pair of trousers we adore and wear until they are ragged; an old shirt we keep for bedtime; or a beloved piece of jewellery we hardly ever take off. Whether we choose to shave or not, have cellulite, beauty marks, scars, or stretch marks, or maintain a specific haircut for comfort or practicality, our everyday appearance and grooming practices can

significantly impact how we feel about ourselves. We are distinctively human because of these and countless more traits.

Only a small number of personal items might be buried with us, and even fewer will be left for later excavation. Even the things we use regularly can be deemed as artefacts, but the things we cherish the most might never be buried with us. What's left of our life to interpret becomes nothing more than an educated guess.

Misinterpretation is not only an issue of anthropological or material findings, rooted in the selfishness of humankind, whether it is the pursuit of fame, profit, or even academic recognition; it is also a deep-seated misogyny in our society, which is reflected in the continued teaching of false information as if it were concrete facts. It is essential to note that this typically does not occur consciously. People reflect their personal beliefs into their research, sometimes even without realising it.



6. Bronze ring worn every day by the author.

I remember being sat down in school, learning History as a subject for the first time. We would start with the prehistoric era, learning about palaeolithic earth, when the first Homo Sapiens roamed the lands. We would learn about cave people, the hunter-gatherer society where women stayed with the children, crafted clothing, and prepared food while men hunted. This idea is still being taught, and at least ten years later, my sister was told the same thing. The argument for this theory is that “this is how it is now, so it must have also been how it worked then.” It truly fits the misogynistic narrative, playing into the “women shouldn’t be in leading positions”, “women are only good for cooking”, and so on. This narrative has been continuously repeated in schools, beginning sometime in the mid-20th century. The issue is not that the people who share this narrative are consciously misogynistic; the problem is that the education system failed them and us. The scripts (here, I am speaking from the experience of a Slovak person who went through the Slovak educational system) are outdated and haven’t been updated for a long time. The social structure and work division they talk about, does not work in our society and was not effective in the hunter-gatherer societies of our ancestors.

There is a growing body of physiological, anatomical, ethnographic, and archaeological evidence to suggest that not only did women hunt in our evolutionary past, but they may have been better suited for such an endurance-dependent activity. Estrogen signals the body to burn more fat—which is beneficial during endurance activity for two key reasons. First, fat has more than twice the calories per gram as carbohydrates do. And it takes longer to metabolise fats than carbs. So, fat provides more bang for the buck overall, and the slow

burn provides sustained energy over longer periods of time, which can delay fatigue during endurance activities like running. In addition to their estrogen advantage, females have a greater proportion of type I muscle fibers relative to males. These are slow oxidative muscle fibers that prefer to metabolize fats. They’re not particularly powerful, but they take awhile to fatigue—unlike the powerful type II fibers that males have more of but that tire rapidly. Doing the same intense exercise, females burn 70 percent more fats than males do, and unsurprisingly, are less likely to fatigue.¹⁴

Increasing numbers of archaeological and anthropological records confirm that prehistoric women were actively involved in hunting, not limited to gathering or domestic work. Human society likely had a flexible division of labour, in which the survival of the group would depend on all its members, regardless of their biological sex. Logically, it would be inefficient and counterproductive for nearly half of the group to be excluded from hunting just based on their biological sex when survival depends on the collective efforts of everyone. This can also be applied in the opposite direction. Why would the males in the group be excluded from gathering and domestic activities when their physical abilities do not limit their participation in such activities?



Similarly, the long-established assumption that early humans spent the majority of their time in caves, making them their homes, is still taught as a hard fact. The theory is supported by the discovery of large quantities of bones and cave paintings that accumulated in the caves over extended periods.

The presence of human remains must raise the question of whether early humans would have chosen to live in the very same location where they laid their dead to rest. Rather than serving as places of permanent residence, the caves most

7. In forager groups, it often makes sense for everyone to do a variety of jobs: <https://www.sapiens.org/biology/gendered-labor-ancient/>

likely have been used for ceremonial, mortuary, or temporary shelter purposes. In contrast, open areas and temporary shelters may have played a more significant role in everyday life.

Furthermore, in the future of humankind, we can examine the process of transformation from a hunter-gatherer society to an agricultural one. Here, several misconceptions are generated. This period, typically referred to as the “Neolithic Revolution”, is somewhat misleading in its title. The word “revolution” suggests a rapid and sudden change, whereas the transformation to a settled way of life was far more complex and gradual, occurring over thousands of years. Early human society slowly adapted to this newfound way of living, gradually abandoning a nomadic lifestyle in favour of permanent settlements. Processes like this involved very significant changes, not only in the way food was produced and acquired but also in social organisation, technology, and human behaviour itself.

One of the key developments during this period was the domestication of plants, particularly cereal grains. The long-accepted theory, which was previously believed to be correct, suggests that agricultural communities predominantly used wheat and other grains to produce bread. It intuitively fits our conventional thinking and daily consumption of baked goods. But rather, the evidence from archaeological data and chemical analyses of Neolithic pottery suggests that fermentation and the production of alcoholic beverages may have been preferred. This suggests that alcohol may have played a significant role in the lives of early humans. The utilisation of alcohol could have varied for social, ritualistic and even nutritional purposes. Alcohol fermentation and the appeal of its effects on the human body and mind

may have been the reason for a complete change in human behaviour and customs, thus laying the foundation for modern civilisation.

The early evidence of alcohol drinking comes from Haifa, modern-day Israel, where the remains of around 13 individuals were buried. Researchers from Stanford University analysed the residue from 13,000-year-old stone mortars found in the cave and recognised evidence of beer brewing.¹⁵

*The earliest biomolecular archaeological and archaeobotanical evidence for grape wine and viniculture from the Near East, ca. 6,000–5,800 BC during the early Neolithic Period, was obtained by applying state-of-the-art archaeological, archaeobotanical, climatic, and chemical methods to newly excavated materials from two sites in Georgia in the South Caucasus. Wine is central to civilization as we know it in the West. As a medicine, social lubricant, mind-altering substance, and highly valued commodity, wine became the focus of religious cults, pharmacopoeias, cuisines, economies, and society in the ancient Near East. This wine culture subsequently spread around the globe. Viniculture illustrates human ingenuity in developing horticultural and winemaking tech traits, wine presses, suitable containers and closures, and so on.*¹⁶

According to this, alcohol played a significant role in the birth of civilization. Although not a misinterpretation or misconception, misogyny, like in any other field, is also present in archaeology and deserves its own publication. Directed towards

women presently working in the field, it is a sad indication that the dead are being subjected to the same treatment.

I recall being part of a university field trip, a month-long excavation over the summer, during which our department was divided into three groups, each working on a different excavation in a different locality. I recall other young women on my team saying that they were glad they weren't assigned to one specific professor who held a high position within the department. When asked why, they explained that they would have to work in the field in direct sunlight without any shade, as no funds had been allocated for this purpose. Therefore, they preferred to wear bikini tops, which would make them a little less uncomfortable. The professor they worked under, then around 70 years old, would take pictures of the excavation. However, rather than focusing on the artefacts, he would point the camera at the women's chests. They caught him taking pictures of them multiple times during the day, but, they did not report the issue to their superiors out of fear of facing problems with department management. The next day, they wore shirts and long pants.

When we see and hear about important men in the field treating their female colleagues in this manner, it not only diminishes their credibility but also reveals how they perceive their research and the artefacts they discover. How are men who disrespect women supposed to make objective assumptions when presented with a female grave containing typically male inventory? Such cases are not rare, and more and more often, we see examples of misinterpreted graves based solely on material inventory that does not fit the sex of the buried individual.¹⁷

¹⁷ This does not mean that these men do not produce good scientific results, or that everything they write or conclude is false. Some of the best scientists and researchers have controversial opinions and questionable behaviours, but produce objective and valuable research. It is simply an observation of a woman who is again and again disappointed by the toxic masculinity and misogynistic behaviour of the men she once looked up to.

15. HISTORY. 'When Did Humans Start Drinking

Alcohol?', 8 January 2025.

16. McGovern et al., 'Early Neolithic Wine of Georgia in the South Caucasus'.

Excluding the medieval Christian community, we must also differentiate between sex and gender. This text is not trying to claim that every person whose inventory and style of burial did not fit their sex identified differently, but there is also a high possibility that gender was viewed in different ways in different cultures and was/will never be as binary as some people try to claim today.

Uncovered in 1878 in Birka, Sweden, these were the remains of an exceptionally highly respected Viking warrior who was elaborately buried in a chamber tomb. These remains were considered to be of a male until new research was undertaken in 2017 (a shocking 139 years after her discovery) proved otherwise. This is especially poignant as during this stretch of time, over 50 papers were published corroborating this mistruth, as no one thought or cared to look deeper into the facts. The misgendering of female remains is a critical issue as the lives of powerful women are being disregarded and new insights into the social and cultural structure of the past are being lost due to the modern prejudices and societal systems.¹⁸

In 2022, graves from 11 early medieval Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in England were revisited and reevaluated, providing essential insights into migration patterns and highlighting the issues associated with relying on previous interpretations.

At West Heslerton, for example, Grave 184 contained a shield boss, spearhead, knife, and buckle, and Grave 144 held a spearhead, knife,

and buckle.

Such objects are traditionally associated with male graves, but the skeletons found with these objects had been osteologically identified as female. Following analysis of these individuals' DNA, both have now been reidentified as genetically male. Such reassessments have also gone the other way: at Buckland, Grave 383 contained beads; Grave 350b had beads, a loop, a buckle, and rings; and a disc brooch, beads, a pair of small square-headed brooches, a buckle, a knife, rings, an armlet, and tweezers were found in Grave 281. Going by grave goods alone, all three would typically be interpreted as female burials, but skeletal characteristics had led to them being interpreted as male. Following a DNA analysis, all of these graves have now been reclassified as genetically female.

Despite the osteological analysis that anthropologists conduct, the only real way of knowing a person's sex is through DNA testing. Anything else is open for interpretation. Bones, although usually very helpful, can sometimes be misleading, depending on whether the examined person exhibited more masculine or feminine traits. But DNA analysis tends to be expensive, and financial constraints are a significant issue for many archaeologists conducting research. It is not often that a research institute has spare money, and I know of some highly educated professionals who would pay for such analyses out of their pocket to have conclusive data available.

But somehow, the ability to say, "we don't know" or "we don't have the means to research this" is not common enough. Archaeologists strive to reach a conclusion, but often overlook the fact that the best approach is to make an interpretation based on the available data. What we cannot do is say with certainty that "this is how it was".

19. Archaeology, 'Grave Affairs'.



8. Birka Woman: Illustrative reconstruction: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Erin-Sebo/publication/334656595/figure/fig6/AS:795495903551491@1566672411663/Grave-BJ-581-at-Birka-Sweden-An-artistic-reconstruction-by-THorhallur-THrainsson-of-the_W640.jpg

18. Russell, Holly. 'Unveiling Her Legacy: Unmasking the Misgendering of Female Remains in Archaeology'. The HERstory Project, 23 July 2023.

Coming from Slovakia, the concept and history of colonisation have always been taught to me primarily theoretically. Although the subject has been included in school curricula, I never directly encountered it until I left my country. Slovakia and Slovaks themselves have been oppressed throughout most of our history. During the peak of imperial colonialism, the biggest struggle was fighting for the right to use our language in schools, churches, and government offices. Most of Slovakia's history has been shaped by occupation—whether during the Ottoman conquest, under the Hungarian Empire, or during the Soviet era and the Warsaw Pact invasion.

Whereas books and documentaries explained the concept of colonisation, talks in school were typically shallow. Statements like, “We did not have any colonies,” or “The Austro-Hungarian Empire did not have any colonies, and that’s why the First World War started” oversimplify the complexity of the political situation and fail to provide a deeper understanding. It wasn’t until I left Slovakia and moved to Austria that I could finally grasp the severity and lasting consequences of colonisation.

Anyone who visits a major museum has likely noticed it—or if they haven’t, it’s because they chose not to. Colonial history is present everywhere, and you don’t even have to look that hard. Upon visiting the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (KHM), you can take a right turn, walk up the stairs, and find yourself in the Egyptian and Near Eastern Collection. As a child, I found this exhibit fascinating and loved the visits. As an adult, I now find this collection somewhat disturbing. The exhibition consists of artefacts imported from Egypt and the Near East—valuable originals that should not be locked behind glass vitrines in Vienna. According to the KHM website, the collection comprises around 17,000 objects; however, there is no mention of

how these objects were acquired.

In addition, the museum exhibits items which reinforce racist stereotyping, such as sculptures and ornamentation that represent minorities in an exaggerated caricature. To my knowledge, they are still displayed. A notable example is a decorative sculpture made of gemstones featuring a small figurine of a Black man portrayed as a caricature with exaggerated and distorted proportions. It would be important for the institutes to acknowledge the difficulties and controversies of the displayed artifacts and utilise them as a teaching opportunity to explain the problems to the public. Exhibiting controversial pieces is not problematic in itself; it can even be beneficial. What is troubling is not educating the broader public on the issues.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many precious artefacts were taken from their countries of origin by wealthy Europeans, often without any consideration for the cultures or people to whom they belonged. The term “stolen”—although harsh—may be the most accurate. This period, commonly referred to as the “Golden Age of Archaeology,” coincided with the “Third Wave of Colonization.” European nations were not only competing for land and resources but also for artefacts and so-called treasures.

Nowadays, museums collaborate globally, borrowing each other’s exhibitions and valuable pieces so that people from all around the world can access them. Returning items to the country of their origin, contributing and helping to educate the broad public and focusing on more temporary exhibitions that rotate might be one potential solution to this issue.

The deeply ingrained racism directly contributed to the exploitation of local populations and the disregard for their cultural heritage and beliefs. European archaeologists and collectors believed that whatever they found and admired was theirs



9. Mummy brown: <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/the-corpse-on-the-canvas-the-story-of-mummy-brown-paint>

to take.

A prime example of this was the wave of British expeditions to Egypt, during which they excavated and looted the tombs of countless ancient Egyptians. The Egyptology boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while advancing knowledge about Ancient Egypt, primarily focused on tombs of the elite. Ordinary people—who made up most of the civilisation—were often removed from their graves and transported to England simply because they were deemed unimportant. This level of disrespect was so extreme that, at one point, England reportedly had “too many mummies.” The surplus led to horrifying practices, such as using mummies as fuel for fireplaces (since their oils burned well and had a pleasant scent), grinding them into powder for medicine, and even using them as pigment for painting, known as “mummy brown”.²⁰

These are not just historical facts; they are ongoing ethical debates. Many institutions are now facing pressure to return stolen artefacts and acknowledge the harm caused by these colonial-era practices. But true reckoning requires more than just repatriation—it demands an honest and critical approach to how museums and educational institutions present history.

But modern-day Egypt was not the only victim of colonial Europe. During one of my visits to the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, organised by our department, it was brought to our attention that the museum has been in possession of human ancestral remains since the 19th century, specifically the skulls of deceased Māori women, men, and children. As previously stated, this is highly problematic and disrespectful not only to the ancestors but also to the deceased people.

In September 2022, these remains were ceremonially returned to a Māori delegation visiting Vienna and thus repatriated where they rightfully belong.



10. Use of “Mummy Brown” in art -
Martin Drölling: Interior of a Kitchen:
<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/old-master-paintings-19th-century-n09303/lot.486.html>



11. A view of a vitrine full of skulls that I encountered during my studies.

Even though many historians, museologists, and archaeologists today try to reflect on this and recognise past mistakes, what is lost is lost, and there are still many issues to reflect upon. The fact that the Ancient Egyptian funerary gifts are being exhibited is deeply insulting to the dead. The point of ancient Egyptian burial is not to be found – not to be disturbed. Why would they place so many curses in their final resting place? Why would they go to such lengths to hide it and preserve it? Usage of mummy brown, or the mummies themselves as fuel, means not only the destruction of the physical body but for the ancient Egyptians, it would mean the destruction of their soul itself (whether a soul truly exists is not the point for now).

Some would say that the deceased individual is never able to provide consent, and the pursuit of knowledge is sufficient justification for exhumation and public display of human remains. The process of opening a grave, taking the skeletal remains and inventory, which often included personal belongings, and then exhibiting them or storing them somewhere in a museum depository feels profoundly dehumanising. We must imagine standing eye-to-eye with the deceased person or their family, justifying the action. Many human remains were excavated but never properly recorded, misplaced, lost, or sold for profit. These people could not give consent.

During my studies of Archaeology, we also attended anthropology lessons, where we learned about anatomy using real human bones and skulls. These skulls were stored in an old vitrine, and although learning from real bones is always better and more practical, especially for archaeologists, something about this situation looks pretty disrespectful. We should be treating the dead with care, and even if the remains are still used for educational and research purposes, there should be

a way to handle and store them respectfully.

A way of handling this that respects the person the remains represent. In the case of the “Gherkin”, a girl from somewhat 1600 years ago found in London, the situation has been handled exemplarily.

In 1992 a bomb exploded in the City of London along St. Mary Axe, destroying the Baltic Exchange, a historic trading centre for the maritime markets. In 1995, as the site was being cleared for new construction, an archaeological investigation discovered the remains of a young girl estimated to be 1,600 years old, from a time when the City of London was the Roman settlement of Londinium. In the April of 2007 she was returned to her Londinium resting place. Rather than have her languish in a dusty storeroom, the developers of the Gherkin requested that she be reburied on site, and a service was held at St. Botolph’s Church in Aldgate. A procession through the city streets followed, and a celebration with musicians approximating ancient Roman tunes. The Lord Mayoress of the City of London was there to spread rose petals on the gravesite, marked with a marble slab decorated with a laurel wreath. There was a dedication of a simple memorial set into the marble benches along Bury Street. The inscription reads, in both English and Latin: “To the spirits of the dead / the unknown young girl / from Roman London / lies buried

12. Gherkin girl gave: <https://www.touristheaven.co.uk/uk/london/roman-london/>

When it comes to the ethics of archaeology, the question concerns not only human beings but also inanimate objects that may have great cultural significance. The Ishtar Gate was one of the wonders unearthed in modern-day Iraq during an extensive excavation of the biblical city of Babylon, led by Robert Koldewey from 1899 to 1917. The gate was then transported to Berlin, where it to this day resides in the Pergamon Museum, and a replica had to be built in Iraq. However, there is no speculation about where the replica and the original should be located. The fact that the country where this gate was built initially had to create a replica as a remembrance of its cultural heritage and the original has not been returned to this day can be considered a tragedy.

This chapter also raises a question: did colonialism, for all its violence, preserve particular objects or findings that would have otherwise been lost? To this, I argue that the majority of ancient or even more recent artefacts have already been lost. Conflict, pillaging and violence do not avoid Europe.

Libraries, memorials, churches, and other historic sites have been destroyed or irreparably damaged in just a few years during the Second World War.

But we don't even have to go as far as the Second World War to see the consequences of art war. The invasion of Ukraine cost numerous lives, but the Russian attacks and occupants deliberately destroyed many valuable items, because how better to destroy a nation than to destroy its cultural heritage?



13. Ishtar Gate - The Gate is one of the centrepieces of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin's collection: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/history-babylon-ishtar-gate-quest>

The Minister of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine, Mykola Tochytskyi, drew up the horrific list of the destruction caused by Russia, with almost 1 200 sites destroyed, including 117 of national importance, as well as over 2 000 cultural institutions damaged, of which 368 have been totally destroyed. 29 Oct 2024

14. Destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine according to google, available on 02.04.2025. 16:09

Archaeologists interpret the excavated materials based on location, burial type, and, if available, historical context, but most importantly, the typology and comparative research. However, as previously stated, we are unable to uncover the whole truth about the past. We are simply creating an image, or a model of the past, that resembles the reality of people who lived in it. This image will never be entirely accurate, despite our best efforts.

Factors influencing this image include the researchers themselves (whether consciously or unconsciously), the socio-political context, and even the recipient. The majority of our non-recorded past is lost, and even recorded history can be manipulated, allowing the narrative to be shifted. Researchers seek answers, but archaeology is not mathematics, and the research can yield multiple outcomes, some clearer than others.

The idea behind good research is that we should always try to disprove our theories. Only then can we effectively prove them to be correct. If we desperately try to prove that what we propose is accurate, we may overlook all the signs that suggest otherwise.

The "Burial of My Own" is a piece inspired by this struggle and depicts how little information archaeologists often work with.

Using my own body and belongings as a medium, I created an image of how future archaeologists may uncover my body and, thus, also a story of a woman from the early Polyethylene Age²² who passed away at a young age. She has been buried by her Christian mother at a Christian cemetery (with the gravestone facing east, as it is a Christian tradition), although not religious herself (the grave was interpreted as Byzantine, which is almost synonymous with Christianity; interestingly, the interpretation was made based on the analogy of the earrings, not the grave orientation). She was placed in a grave with her favourite belongings, but the watch she wore every day was not buried with her; it was kept in the family. She had stretched ears, but the tunnels

22. Polyethylene Age refers to a term created by the author to identify the time period we currently live in („Plastic Age“)

she wore were made from wood and decomposed over time. The only thing that remained was a pair of her favourite earrings. The nose ring has been removed, but the rings on her fingers were left in place.

Her tattoos have been covered for the burial, not surviving the decomposition process anyway. Her wish to be buried in an eco-friendly wicker coffin has been granted, and it was covered by a simple white cloth; none of this has been preserved for future archaeologists to uncover.

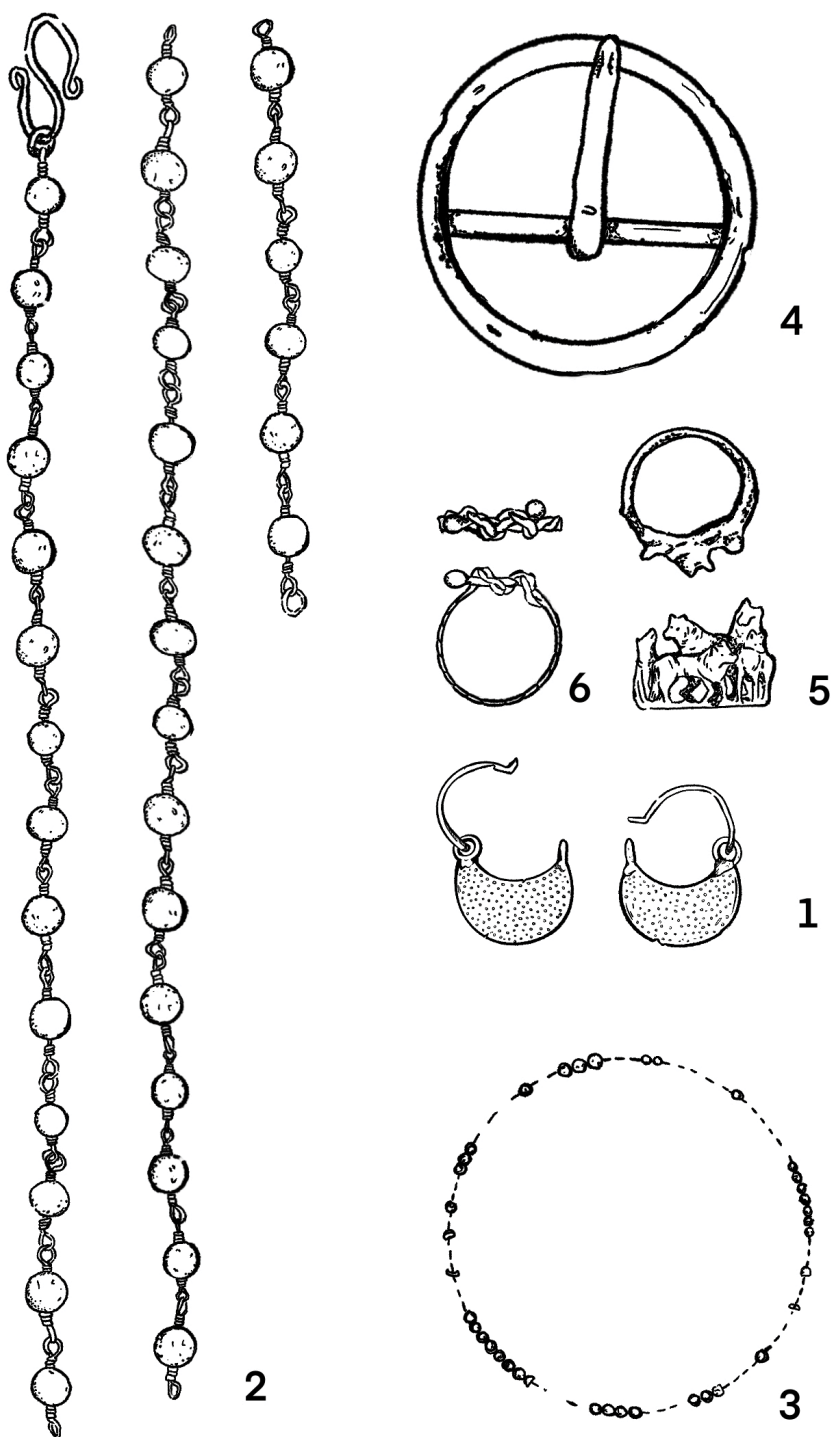
There is no telling from her bones how she died²³, and so the cause of her death remains a mystery. There are no indicators on her pelvis that could indicate she was ever pregnant, so childbirth is ruled out. Illness, famine, infection or suffocation are all possible causes. Of course, I know the cause of her death. But I will not give it away. As future archaeologists wouldn't be able to tell, I leave it to remain a mystery.

This fake burial has been documented in the same manner as an actual burial would be, and it has been sent to my past lecturer and friend, Mgr. Martin Neumann, PhD, who is one of the most capable archaeologists I know. It was presented to him as a genuine grave, and he examined it, writing a report under the assumption that it was, in fact, an actual grave. I must mention that he was working with very little information, and the drawings provided were slightly adjusted so as not to reveal everything (for example, the LEVI'S logo on my belt has been removed). The jewellery itself was mostly purchased on historical markets; both rings come from medieval fairs where skilled artists create replicas of medieval jewellery, and the necklace was acquired during the Roman festival in the Roman City of Carnuntum, also as a replica. The earrings are also handmade and come from a street vendor in Bratislava.

Archaeologists who draw these burial situations are human as well, and mistakes in the documentation happen more often than not. Later, when revisiting these, the mistakes are included in the final publication.

Dear Rebecca

23. I intend to donate organs after I die, which might leave (post-mortem) marks on my bones. They would be dependable on what organ is harvested. For the sake of the story, I will go with a kidney and say no traces of the surgery were left.



15. Jewellery "found" in a the fictional grave.

I am sending you the text about the grave you sent me. I do have to say that it was a hell of a challenge. I was able to find a pretty good analogy for the earrings, which allowed me to date the grave. I am still not quite sure about the "dog" ring - something like that I see for the first time. The fibulae is also a bit problematic, because similar ones I know from the late medieval times, or the Early Modern Period, and for the Avar Khaganate, completely different shapes of fibulae are typical. Although I cannot rule out that in other regions of Europe in this period, they were present, and it got to the grave as an "import". I was looking everywhere, but I am not much wiser. Anyway, I wrote something and am sending it to you. I hope you'll have time to implement it into your work. I wish you good luck!

Martin

Grave pit

The grave pit has an approximately rectangular shape with rounded corners and narrows towards the bottom. It is not apparent from the drawing whether the individual was placed in the grave in a coffin, on a bier, in a funeral shroud, or in a sack, among other options. The dimensions are of unknown depth and are tailored to the individual's height. There were no apparent traces of a wooden structure.

Buried individual

The individual is placed in the grave pit in an upright position, facing east-west, with their head to the west. The skeleton of the individual is likely to be preserved in its entirety, based on the drawing, which also shows the preservation of small bones in the upper and lower limbs. The upper limbs are slightly bent at the elbows and set in the lumbar region. The skull is somewhat inclined

towards the south. The E-W orientation is the most common orientation of graves and individuals buried in them during the Avar Khaganate period, as indicated by the grave inventory (see below). Regarding the funeral equipment, it is likely that a female individual was involved, although the sex can only be determined through DNA analysis. The individual had not yet developed all wisdom teeth. Only three of them were cut and in the wrong position – two grew towards the inside of the cheek, and one pressed against the neighbouring molars. The fourth wisdom tooth has not been developed. Based on the analysis of the dentition, it can be concluded that it is an adult who has reached at least 18-24 years of age.

Grave inventory

Item No. 1 is an earring, most likely made of gold; however, silver specimens are also known, although they are less common. Analogous earrings are found on the territory of the Byzantine Empire and in its neighbouring areas, especially in Italy and the territory of the Avar Khaganate. In that case, the occurrence of this type of earrings would be associated exclusively with the western half of the Avar Khaganate (today mainly around the cities of Keszthely and Pécs) in its older phase, namely the end of the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th century AD. The earrings were found on the left side of the skull in her temporal area.

Object No. 2 is a necklace composed of multiple beads, each individually strung on short wires. These wires are finished with loops that connect them to the adjacent, identical segment of the necklace. The necklace was fastened with an S-shaped clasp. The material from which the beads were made cannot be determined from the drawing, as it could be glass, amber, precious stones, or pearls. As with the earring, it may be the product of an unknown Byzantine workshop or a jeweller influenced by

Byzantine fashion, operating even outside the Byzantine Empire. The necklace was found beneath the jaw, in the area of the cervical vertebrae and both collar bones.

Object No. 3 is a bracelet composed of multiple beads, several of which are already missing. As in the case of the necklace, the material from which the beads were made cannot be determined from the drawing. Initially, they were probably strung on a cord that disintegrated in the grave. The bracelet was found on the individual's right wrist.

Object No. 4 is a circular-shaped metal buckle with a transverse rib and a prong attached to it. Again, the material from which it was made cannot be determined (bronze?). The buckle was located in the individual's lumbar region.

Object No. 5 is a ring, most likely cast, as indicated by the complex motif of a pack of five dogs or wolves. It is likely an import from the Byzantine Empire. The ring was found on the middle finger of the individual's right hand.

Object No. 6 is a ring made of twisted wire (likely a precious metal) with two small gemstones or pearls set in place. The ring was found on the ring finger of the individual's left hand.

Number	Status	Observations
16	Present	Small cavity, unmodified
18	Present	Wisdom tooth growing outwards towards cheek
21	Present	Chip on the tooth
28	Present	Wisdom tooth growing outwards towards cheek, smaller in size (not developed properly?)
31	Present	Slight wear, chip on the tooth
38	Present	Wisdom tooth is not fully emerged, growing towards other teeth and pushing them to the front. Smaller in size
41	Present	Slight wear
48	Missing (AT)	Possibly not developed

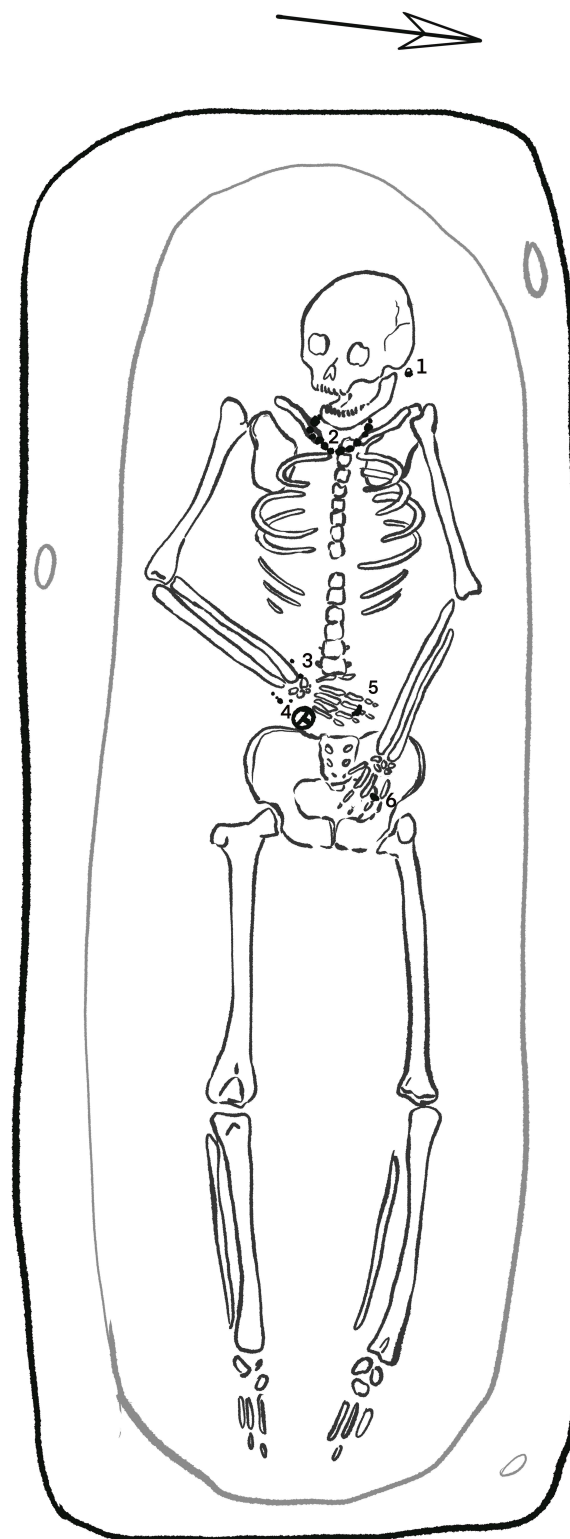
17. Dental chart

Conclusion

This is likely the grave of an adult female individual (at least adultus I) from the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries AD. The primary chronological indicator is the earring, which was produced in a Byzantine workshop or influenced by Byzantine fashion. Given the occurrence of analogous earring shapes, it is likely that the grave was found somewhere on the outskirts of the Byzantine Empire or in adjacent regions, such as Italy or the western part of the Carpathian Basin.

Besides the official interpretation by Martin Neumann, the grave has been shown to another archaeologist, who interpreted it as a Celtic grave, most likely after the Roman occupation. Based on the good shape of the teeth, it was suggested that the individual might be from a higher social caste. Notably, both archaeologists had a tendency to interpret the grave in a manner consistent with their respective fields of research. Therefore, a larger-scale research study with a more extensive test group should be conducted within the scope of a doctoral dissertation.

It is interesting to witness firsthand how many things about me are lost after I die. No one will know what my name was (if my tombstone is destroyed), what I did for a living, what hairstyle I wore, or that I have a spot of missing pigment on my belly and a scar from a zipper on my knee. All these are the things that make me human, but they will be gone forever.



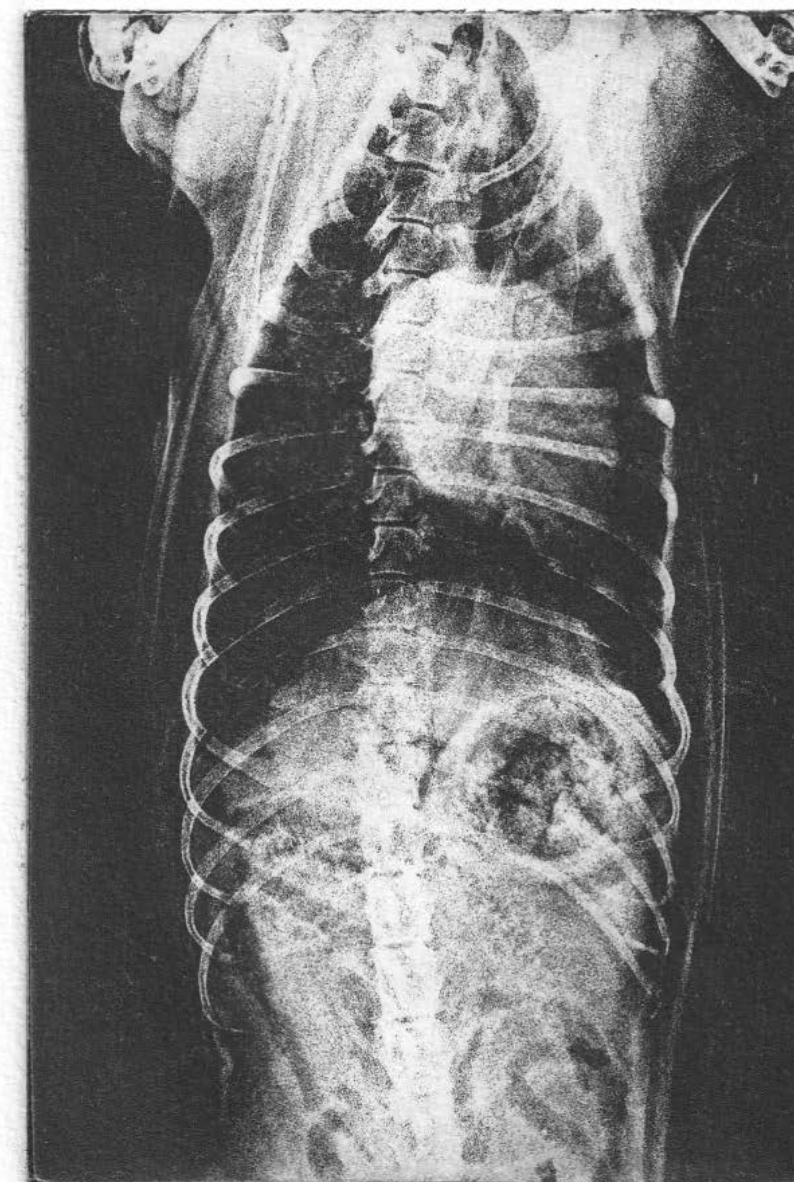
17. Fictional grave

It will be nine years since my dog Vivien broke her leg. It was an accident; she jumped and fell on her leg, twisting it and breaking it in two places. Dogs around 11 months old are prone to accidents like these because this is a time in their lives when their bones are most brittle due to rapid growth. It was indeed a scary event, but it serves as proof that the butterfly effect is indeed in effect.

She had to wear a cast for close to two months, and we had to take her for an X-ray regularly. On one of these X-rays, I had to hold her still so she wouldn't move, and the image captured my hand as well. More importantly, it also captured the ring that I was wearing, which I am still wearing as I write this. This later sparked the idea of connecting the X-ray artworks with archaeology. Similarly, as metal and more durable objects are visible on X-rays, most of the same materials would survive for years after being buried underground, waiting to be discovered later.

So why not imagine myself as someone being excavated? The thought of seeing my bones and knowing how they look captivated me, as well as using X-rays as an art. Having multiple animal X-rays, I began experimenting with them to see how the images would look. Having access to the printmaking studio and technologies I would not usually have, I experimented with the photo etching technique, which confirmed that using X-rays as a medium is something I want to incorporate into my artistic practice.

The process of obtaining the X-rays has been purely accidental and based on luck. I received a chest X-ray when I contracted a dangerous strain of lung chlamydia after being coughed at at a dog exhibition. The knee and foot x-rays I obtained this March (2025) after falling from a bicycle, and my skull was x-rayed after a plea to a very willing and open-minded doctor, who shall remain anonymous.



18. Rebecca Martínková: Through the Flesh



19. Meret Oppenheim: X-Ray of M.O.'s Skull (Röntgenaufnahme des Schädels M.O.). 1964, printed 1981: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/425930>



20. Robert Gligorov: XXX-Ray: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/robert-gligorov/3>

Multiple X-rays will be compiled to form a model of my body, and the missing pieces will be replaced with simple illustrations.

This is to model an archaeological excavation and the ammount of fantasy going into the interpretations.

Using X-rays as a medium has been done before, although today, doctors are more hesitant and unwilling to provide them. However, numerous artists found a way to incorporate them into their practice.

Notable is a collection Antropický princíp (1982-1985) from Slovak artist Rudolf Sikora. He combined the concept of space with his own X-ray images, focusing on the theory that space is compatible with a sentient form of life and, from the beginning, set out to create it.

Another, maybe more vulgar use of X-ray in art was done by Robert Gligorov in 1996, as well as Meret Oppenheim in 1964 and 1981.



21. Rudolf Sikora: Autoportrét II: https://www.webumenia.sk/en/dielo/SVK:SGB.G_6996/zoom

Conclusion

This paper explored the blurred lines between fiction and archaeology, examining how and if a fictional grave and its inventory can be interpreted within the framework of traditional archaeological analysis. The study highlights the strengths and weaknesses of archaeological research while also pointing out the potential misinterpretation of the available data. The paper demonstrated that a burial is a minuscule fraction of a person's life, carrying great potential for misinterpretation. However, to determine the true extent of this problem, larger-scale research with a larger test group would be necessary. Typically, single graves are incredibly difficult to interpret, and archaeologists often have access to entire necropolises and/or settlements, allowing them to create a more comprehensive picture with additional information.

The X-ray imagery further emphasises the uncertainty of what is visible and what remains hidden. It questions the connections between documentation, personal identity and artistic representation. It serves as a metaphor for archaeological analysis, highlighting the significant gaps in knowledge about the person it represents.

Ultimately, the work questions the importance of material things and highlights the role of the narratives that are shaping our understanding of history. Just like archaeologists add meaning to incomplete records, this project creates a past that never really was but still holds an interpretative value. It challenges the assumption that objective truth can be derived solely from the fragments left behind in our history and invites us to reevaluate the ways we create it.

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